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# Escaping the Politics of the Irredeemable Earth— Anarchy and Transcendence in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon

Seán Molloy

But staggering subsets, fellows – you see what this means don't you? Those Indian mystics and Tibetan lamas and so forth were right all along, the world we think we know can be dissected and reassembled into any number of worlds, each as real as 'this' one

(*Against the Day*, 1212).

In her discussion of Orwell's *1984*, Judith Shklar makes a compelling case for the use of literature in political theory contra the Platonic opposition to the poets. She concludes that political theory is not tied to an external reality, but rather is part of the 'languages of the republic of letters' and that it is by 'attending carefully to all imaginative and scholarly literature' that one can 'establish the historical identity of ideas' (Shklar, 1985, 17). The advantage of widening political theory's compass to include literature is that this allows a greater capacity to play out the potentialities inherent in political theory, as literature, 'illustrates, dramatizes, personalizes, and raises the questions that political theory asks and the ideas it suggests. It even helps us to tell our stories, and indeed may even help us to decide what story to tell and how to go about it' (Shklar, 1985, 17). Richard Rorty goes further when he states: 'Fiction ... gives us the details about kinds of suffering being endured by people to whom we had previously not attended. Fiction ... gives us the details about what sorts of cruelty we ourselves are capable of, and thereby lets us redescribe ourselves. That is why the novel, the movie, and the TV program have, gradually but steadily, replaced the sermon and the treatise as the principal vehicles of moral change and progress' (Rorty, 1989, xvi).

Perhaps the most eloquent testimony regarding the benefits of using literary texts in relation to politics and ethics is that of Martha Nussbaum: 'certain truths about human life can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and forms characteristic of the narrative artist. With respect to certain elements of human life, the terms of the novelist's art are alert winged creatures, perceiving where the blunt terms of ordinary speech, or of abstract theoretical discourse, are blind, acute where they are obtuse, winged where they are dull and heavy' (Nussbaum, 1989, 5). America, the 'Applied Enlightenment' according to Ralf Dahrendorf (Hoffman, 1995, 219) and dedicated above all to the concept of democracy, almost as a consequence has to produce political literature, as Deneen and Romance express it, 'it is hard to imagine such a democratic society not producing a literature that is decidedly political' (Deneen and Romance, 2005, 1). Allowing that literature provides us with alternative realities and vocabularies from which to extract lessons and to play out the logics and narratives of political life begs the question, which of our contemporary leading authors can lay claim to the mantle of being the successor to politically aware writers such as Huxley, Koestler, Orwell, Nabokov? Thomas Pynchon, the National Book Award winner and perennial Nobel Prize for Literature candidate, is one such figure in that his writings, to varying degrees, exhibit both literary excellence and also consistent engagement with political questions, such as the role of the state, the possible emancipation of the individual and society and ultimately the transcendence of politics itself. Such is Pynchon's cultural significance that Harold Bloom has described Pynchon as, 'the crucial American writer of prose fiction at the present time' (Bloom, 2003, 1). In addition to his cultural importance, Pynchon is a significant political thinker because, as Samuel Thomas expresses it in *Pynchon and the Political*, 'he is a novelist capable of startling political insight. Furthermore, he is also a novelist who forces us to rethink what the political actually is' (Thomas, 2007, 152).

In the absence of a political manifesto penned by Thomas Pynchon those interested in what his works have to say about political life in late modernity are forced to interpret his texts and from them reconstruct a political philosophy. Given that these texts represent some of the most difficult in English literature, this is no easy task and any interpretation must perforce be partial and provisional – Pynchon, as Walt Whitman might say, 'contains multitudes.' The interpretation that I put forward of Pynchon's political thought proceeds from the identification of two separate but linked layers of political life and related theories in Pynchon's works. The first layer is what we might call the 'simple' politics of Thomas Pynchon which is rooted in the Left (and probably the far

Left in American terms), that denounces the excesses of both state and market and promotes the interests of the working class against the structural and systemic forces that are ranged against the proletariat. In so far as Pynchon is an advocate of a certain style of political life, it would seem that he favours some form of resistance to the power of state and market, and throughout his work there is a marked sympathy with anarchism. This advocacy of anarchism, however, is merely one part, and certainly not the culmination, of Pynchon's political vision. Pynchon is too much of a political realist to ignore the disparity between ought and is, as he observes in the article *Nearer My Couch to Thee*: 'How can we not recognize our world? Occasions for choosing good present themselves in public and private for us every day, and we pass them by' (NMC). Pynchon's work is rooted in (but not confined to) this human, all too human reality and as he identifies in *Slow Learner*, Machiavelli is a 'mighty influence' on his work (SL, 8). For Pynchon, the question of how to live the good life does not end with the question 'what is the good life?' but rather seeks to attempt to answer the question 'why has the good life not been realised'? It is this question that forces Pynchon deeper into the political, that provokes him to develop a more profound theory of political life that finds expression in a political cosmology that depends on a consistent deployment of metaphors drawn from the Western tradition that represents Earth as a contested sphere between Heaven and Hell. This is a cosmology that is peculiar to Pynchon, it is neither Christian nor Classical, but incorporates elements of both. Perhaps the greatest originality and value of Pynchon's cosmology is that it presents us with a universe in which Man has neither faith nor guide in the manner of Dante or cunning intelligence in the manner of Odysseus with which to mediate or pacify the forces to which he is subject. Pynchon presents us with another vision of slob, inadequate, perverts and innocents who must negotiate the perils of life without the benefit of divine intervention or preternatural political intelligence. Pynchon's task is to outline what humanity's options are in the face of its own inadequacy and the power of the forces that threaten to overwhelm it. Pynchon's political theory is truly holistic and global in nature, transcending the divide between domestic and international politics. Pynchon's novels progress through space and time encapsulating the pathologies of power and the costs of peace.

In this article, I intend to concentrate on the development of Pynchon's political thought rather than dealing with the politics of conspiracy and counter-conspiracy that many commentators have discussed. The first part of this paper deals with Pynchon's general attitude towards politics, concentrating on two pieces, his introduction to the short story collection, *Slow Learner*, and his 2003 essay on Orwell that served as an introduction to the Orwell centenary edition of *1984*. These essays are useful in that they provide us with an opportunity to read Pynchon's thoughts on politics and the political role of the author in mid and late career. The second part of the paper concentrates on the identification of the three orders of the Pynchon cosmos, the subterranean, the terrestrial and the superterrestrial and the politics of resistance, flight and transcendence in the face of evil that Pynchon detects as permeating both humanity and the cosmos. Considerations of space have forced me to select two texts, *Against the Day* and *Vineland* as the focus of this section, although there will be reference to other important expressions of Pynchon's political cosmology where and when appropriate.

## Part One—Pynchon and Politics

The dominant interpretation of Pynchon is one that identifies his political beliefs with anarchism. There is a powerful *prima facie* case to be made for this interpretation. As Benton notes anarchist themes and generally sympathetic anarchist characters populate his work from *V.* onwards. Pynchon, does not present his Anarchism in simple terms, he persistently stresses the double-edged nature of anarchism as being 'both a potentially utopic aspiration and a horrific plunge into chaos, annihilation and destruction' (Benton, 1999, 539/540, 550). Benton goes so far as to suggest that in his work 'Pynchon asks us to read this confluence of controlling networks as an anarchist' (Benton, 1999, 549) and to make the case for an anarchist aesthetic in Pynchon's work that 'emphasizes heterogeneity over uniformity, spontaneity over conformity, and fragmentation over consolidation' (Benton, 1998, 163). Stressing an almost metaphysical anarchism, George Levine argues that Pynchon's work exhibits a 'pressure toward anarchy' that 'might release us ironically, into a more humane order' (Levine, 2003, 61).

One element of the anarchistic reading of Pynchon that is certainly correct is that society in his novels is divided between those who possess power and those who do not possess power. This theme is present in both Pynchon's fiction and also in, *A Journey into the Mind of Watts*, his

indictment of police brutality in Watts and the role it played in provoking a reaction by the black community in the 1960s – a piece described by one critic as ‘a polemic against the white establishment’ (Seed, 1982, 60). Pynchon’s realisation of this division between those who have power and those who resist the powerful is important in the development of his political consciousness (Gochenour, 2003, 40). An early expression of this reaching towards a politics of resistance is the dilemma of Lardass Levine in *The Slow Rain* as to where to place his loyalties: with the ‘grunts’ who performed heroics and were characterised by humanity or the officers who despite their education and status were stupid and lacked empathy (SL, 6). Levine’s laconic insubordination towards his senior officers and lackadaisical attitude in general becomes a template for many Pynchon characters (e.g., Benny Profane and most of The Whole Sick Crew in V.) that reject but do not seek to oppose the system within which they are enmeshed, but rather accept a lower position within it to avoid the corruption of greater complicity inherent in progression up the ladder of command. Levine’s class consciousness is one of knowing acceptance and resignation, almost of passive resistance, to the regime in which he finds himself embedded.

The context in which *The Slow Rain* and the other stories gathered in *Slow Learner* were written is crucial in order to understand Pynchon’s development as a writer with political intent. The intellectual impact of the Beats coupled with the social turmoil of the 1960s produced for Pynchon the conditions for revolution in both language and politics as the starkly divided conservative and progressive elements of American society clashed. The Beat phenomenon was important to those that followed it, as the literature produced by the Beats represented according to Pynchon ‘what, after all, was a sane and decent affirmation of what we all want to believe about American values’ (SL, 9). In the aftermath of the Beats, new voices, new styles of American writing were having a revolutionary effect on what literature was, while demands for social change were linked in a vague and inchoate manner to this revolution in language: ‘It was not a case of either/or, but an expansion of possibilities. I don’t think we were consciously groping after any synthesis, although perhaps we should have been’ (SL, 7). Pynchon identifies this failure to develop a synthesis between street level political life and intellectual life as one of the reasons for the weakness of the New Left in the ‘60s. Blue collar workers and university students lacked an effective means of discussing politics on an equal basis as ‘the presence of real, invisible class force fields in the way of communication between the two groups’ (SL, 7) would not allow for the development of a wide and deep coalition – a condition that arguably persists to the present day.

If the promotion of class consciousness is a major preoccupation of Pynchon’s literature then the other major theme is the question of the state and those who run the organs of the state apparatus, although as Crowley claims, this has been the subject of relatively little commentary (Crowley, 1998). It is fair to say that Pynchon is no admirer of politicians, especially those politicians of the Cold War described as ‘that succession of the criminally insane who have enjoyed power since 1945’ (SL, 19). Pynchon returns to this theme of a power elite by reference to Eisenhower’s warning about the military industrial complex in the New York Times article ‘Is it Okay to be a Luddite?’ ‘there is now a permanent power establishment of admirals, generals and corporate CEO’s, up against whom us average poor bastards are completely outclassed’ (OKL). The Cold War is the international context that, with the domestic turmoil of the ‘60’s, best explains the first phase of Pynchon’s career, culminating with the publication of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. The Cold War and the threat of imminent destruction that it entailed are described by Pynchon as ‘our common nightmare The Bomb’ (SL, 18; Celman, 1993). The powerful and powerless metaphor is preserved in that only the powerful (the criminally insane politicians) live immune to the threat, while ‘most of the rest of us poor sheep have always been struck with simple, standard fear,’ (SL, 19). This fear has amplified the powerlessness of the oppressed while political life in the shadow of the bomb has resulted in the ‘slow escalation of our helplessness and terror,’ which can be dealt with in a spectrum of responses ranging ‘from not thinking about it to going crazy from it.’ Technology has further exacerbated the politics of fear and normalised the prospect of nuclear holocaust:

By 1945, the factory system – which, more than any piece of machinery was the real and major result of the Industrial Revolution – had been extended to include the Manhattan Project, the German long-range rocket program and the death camps, such as Auschwitz. It has taken no major gift of prophecy to see how these three curves of development might plausibly converge ... An unblinking acceptance of a holocaust running to seven-and eight-figure body counts has become – among those who, particularly since 1980, have been guiding our military policies – conventional wisdom

(OKL).

Interestingly, Pynchon classifies literature in the face of this threat as a kind of feeble resistance, 'somewhere on this spectrum of impotence is writing fiction about it – occasionally, as here, offset to a more colourful time and place' (SL, 19). Pynchon's writing then, at least up until *Vineland*, is deliberately conceived in the fear of the Cold War and the politics its peculiar pathology demanded. Pynchon as an advocate of the Left sees his political role as being the speaking of truth to power, to confront the 'criminally insane' with the malignant consequences of their power-fixated psychoses, either directly as in *V.*, *Vineland* and *Against the Day* or by reference to the ultimate expression of politics as violent orgy and death worship in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

After the Cold War, Pynchon's focus shifts from fear of obliteration to fear of enslavement to capitalism and its negative effects on society and the human spirit, which I identify as the main political premises of *Vineland*, *Mason and Dixon* and *Against the Day*. Fear of the future, class conflict and the iniquities of the State all feature in Pynchon's introduction to Orwell's *1984*. The relevant context (although unstated) in this piece is that of 9/11 and the War on Terror, which, like WW2 before it, allows for the trivialisation of civil liberties and human rights, revealing the inherent fascism that underpins the state:

With the homeland in danger, strong leadership and effective measures become of the essence, and if you want to call that fascism, very well, call it whatever you please, no one is likely to be listening

(1984, viii).

War then justifies fascism, and perpetual war, as between Oceania, Eurasia and East Asia, allows fascism seemingly in perpetuity. Pynchon is too subtle a writer to hit us over the head with obvious parallels to a War on Terror that is presented in the National Security Strategy of 2002 as being of undefined duration and almost limitless location. Pynchon also declines to engage in a discussion of the Patriot Act and its more sinister features of surveillance and control but does make one hint at the possibilities of social control in an era typified by ever more powerful technology in the hands of those who in his opinion foster a condition of universal doublethink to paralyse dissent and thereby seek to hold on to power 'preferably forever,' (1984, xi). Such is the power that technology, and in particular the Internet, has afforded the State that it 'promises social control on a scale that those quaint old twentieth-century tyrants with their goofy moustaches could only dream about,' (1984, xv). Rather than presenting the system of surveillance in sinister terms, as Orwell does in *1984*, Pynchon lays bare and criticises a culture that glamorises its forms (e.g., the police helicopter) in 'countless 'crime dramas', themselves forms of social control,' (1984, xiv).

The inference Pynchon makes is that despite the differences in political circumstances of WW2, the Cold War (real and in Orwell's case, imagined to the *Nth* degree) and the era of the War on Terror, there is one common theme – the persistence of a lust for power, which in the case of Oceania, for example, 'lies in the exercise of power for its own sake' (1984, xx). This identification of a lust for power inherent in Man is, for Pynchon, Orwell's greatest achievement:

Orwell in 1948 understood that despite the Axis defeat, the will to fascism had not gone away, that far from having seen its day it had perhaps not yet even come into its own – the corruption of spirit, the irresistible human addiction to power, were already long in place, all well-known aspects of the Third Reich and Stalin's USSR, even the British Labour Party, like the first drafts of a terrible future

(1984, xiv).

The terrible, psychological power of totalitarians, of both Left and Right, is that they have the ability to not only control and lockdown societies by means of brutal repression, but that they also have the key to the inner politics of the mind. Julia's confidence that she could tell Big Brother what he wanted to hear and retain her internal independence in a manner similar to Lardass Levine (albeit in far more horrible circumstances) enrages Pynchon with its naivety:

The poor kid. You want to grab her and shake her. Because that is just what they do – they get inside, they put the whole question of soul, of what we believe to be an inviolable inner core of the self, into harsh and terminal doubt. By the time they have left the Ministry of Love, Winston and Julia have entered permanently the condition of double-think, the anterooms of annihilation, no longer in love but able to hate and love Big Brother at the same time. It is as dark an ending as can be imagined

Pynchon interprets *1984* as a warning from the Left against the terrors held not only by fascism, but the fascism within the Left itself, and one may infer inherent in all political life. Pynchon certainly suggests this in *Vineland* when Frenesi Gates ponders her own seduction by Fascism in terms of a genetic weakness for the 'seduction and initiation into the dark joys of social control' (*Vineland*, 83). This is a common theme for Pynchon, that there is something within human nature, even the more enlightened and sympathetic of his characters, that is attracted to authoritarianism and fascist power. Frenesi's daughter, Prairie, in the same novel longs for Brock Vond to take her away and spend more time with her, despite the destruction of her family at his hands, a sentiment that Molly Hite portrays as 'striking a deeply problematic concluding note that suggests complicity may be as ingrained and inherent as mortality' (Hite, 1994). This idea of an inherent, genetic weakness for evil is further attested to by Pynchon in *Against the Day*, where Lake Traverse, Frenesi's great-great aunt, runs away with her father's assassin (and eventual serial killer) Deuce Kindred. Pynchon's most elegant and persuasive expression of this fatal flaw within the fabric of humanity is provided by Roger Mexico, one of the members of the 'Counterforce' resisting the machinations of the System in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Mexico's theory is that humanity cannot resist the power of the evil because it is in fact complicit with evil: 'The Man has a branch office in each of our brains ... and each local rep has a cover known as the Ego ... We do know what's going on, and we let it go on.' (GR, 845; Muste, 1981, 170; Russell, 1980, 34). This theme of inner evil, or complicity with evil, is echoed by Miles Blundell in *Against the Day*, who when surveying the infernal light of industrial Los Angeles speaks of the 'persistence within the human heart, immune to time,' of the influence of 'Lucifer, son of the morning, bearer of light ... Prince of Evil' (AtD, 1161–1162).

Fear of the future and an awareness of the immensity of the social forces ranged against and within Man can provoke however a care for the future rooted in love. In his conclusion to the *1984* introduction Pynchon describes a photograph showing Orwell holding his adopted son. The infant is smiling and Pynchon interprets the smile as proceeding 'out of an unhesitating faith that the world, at the end of the day, is good, and that human decency, like parental love, can always be taken for granted—a faith so honourable that we can almost imagine Orwell, and perhaps even ourselves, for a moment anyway, swearing to do whatever must be done to keep it from ever being betrayed' (1984, xxv). The political role of the author for Pynchon therefore is to warn against the forces that condemn humanity to the dark fates both he and Orwell predict as a consequence of the betrayal of human decency and love.

## Part Two—Pynchon's Political Cosmology: The Question of Evil in Humanity and the Universe

Explaining the condition of Man as a political entity, enthralled to power and forever teetering on the brink of falling into one or other form of fascism, is the deeper purpose of Pynchon's works. Orwell's success as a 'prophet' lay in his ability 'to see deeper than most of us into the human soul.' Pynchon likewise has a profound ability to see deep into the human soul, but does so in terms beyond the human, incorporating forces greater than humanity, from worlds deeper or higher than our own. In this sense, divisions of Left and Right are merely instances in a wider conflict that results from the presence and operation of Evil.

Drawing on and echoing Dante's *Divine Comedy*, there are essentially three spheres in Pynchon's cosmos – Hell, Heaven and Earth. The Earth lies between Heaven and Hell as a contested sphere, although the contest is not between spirits of Heaven and Hell as in Christian doctrine, but rather a contest between those who are complicit with or acquiesce to the presence of Evil on Earth and those who resist or attempt to escape it.

The spirits of the sky are often typified by an indifference to the affairs of Man and when they do become entangled in mortal affairs inadvertently cause mayhem and madness, as in V. The true importance of the superterrestrial sphere lies not in its inhabitants, who never really make themselves known, but lies rather in the existence of the sphere as something of an aspirational realm, a more perfect order in which humanity could share. Dr. Vormance expresses this in *Against the Day* when, prefiguring the end of the novel, he outlines a future in which humanity approaches the transcendent:

Now we have taken the first few wingbeats of what will allow us to begin colonizing the skies. Somewhere in it God dwells in his Heavenly City. How far into that unmapped wilderness shall we journey before we find Him? Will He withdraw before our advance, continue to withdraw into the infinite? Will he send back to us divine Agents, to help, to deceive, to turn us away? Will we leave settlements in the Sky, along our invasion routes, or will we choose to be wanderers, striking camp each morning, content with nothing short of Zion? And what of colonizing additional dimensions beyond the third? Colonize Time. Why not?

(AtD, 147).

Positive characters such as Takeshi Fumimota are represented commending 'himself to the gods of the sky,' (*Vineland*, p. 143). The character who gets closest to experiencing the superterrestrial is Kit Traverse who describes Lake Baikal as 'like Mount Kailash, or Tengri Khan, parts of a superterrestrial order included in this lower, broken one' (AtD, 863) and who eventually reaches an inner Shambhala, a zone of personal transcendence.

The relationship between the three orders of Heaven, Earth and Hell, however, is not one of a balance of power. In *Vineland*, Pynchon presents a cosmological history in which Hell is the clear victor: 'When the Earth was still a paradise, long, long ago, two great empires, Hell and Heaven, battled for its possession. Hell won, and Heaven withdrew to an appropriate distance' (*Vineland*, 382). The irony in this victory is that it was in fact unnecessary, as the Earth is Hell's sister sphere, that the destiny of the Earth is *Anschluss* with Hell, that Hell's 'original promise was never punishment, but reunion, with the true, long forgotten metropolis of Earth Unredeemed.' (*Vineland*, 383). The dominant metaphor in Pynchon's work therefore is that of the encroachment of evil and the eventual union of Hell and Earth, with *Gravity's Rainbow* also raising the possibility of the corruption of Heaven.

The subterranean sphere of Evil is located in the bowels of the Earth, or the underground in general. When projected outwards this evil takes many and varied forms, from the physical manifestation of the Tatzelwurm in the tunnels under the Alps in *Against the Day* to Blicero's psychotic, fairytale lair in Peenemunde in *Gravity's Rainbow*. It is from the latter that the rocket 00000 emerges to corrupt the sky with its scream and to devastate the Earth with the force of its explosion – the perfect exemplar of the union of technology, fascism and *thanatos*. In discussing the Tatzelwurm, Gerhard maintains that the worm is a good argument for Hell, 'for some primordial plasm of hate and punishment at the center of the Earth which takes on different forms, the closer it can be projected to the surface' (AtD, 737). The forms extend to human avatars of evil such as Blicero, other notable examples being Scarsdale Vibe in *Against the Day* and Brock Vond in *Vineland*. Pynchon's understanding of Evil, however, cannot be reduced to the role of these avatars, they are merely agents of a more thorough going systemic and structural operationalisation of a fascistic will to power that emanates within, between and beyond human nature. Frenesi Gates, the corrupted rebel who serves as an agent for the state is caught in her own hellish underworld, forced to betray her friends and former allies by a system that operates despite changes in the administration:

The personnel changed, the Repression went on, growing wider, deeper and less visible, regardless of the names in power, office politics far away now determined the couples' posting ... becoming tangled in an infinite series of increasingly squalid minor sting operations of steadily diminishing scope and return

(*Vineland*, 72).

It is a common feature of all Pynchon's novels from *V.* to *Against the Day* that Evil sets the agenda to which the various protagonists must then address themselves. Evil characters are presented as forceful, dynamic and focused and the systems they serve as implacable, expanding across time and space. Evil not only sets the agenda in the novels but dominates the society, economy and politics of the Pynchon universe-deepening and widening its influence from the relatively innocent era of *Mason & Dixon*, to the apotheosis of Evil in the culminations of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Such is the power of Evil that it can even transcend time as with the attempted conquest of the past by the Trespassers in *Against the Day*. The options that Pynchon presents as available to humanity in the face of Evil range along a spectrum from complicity with these forces, to acquiescence, resistance, flight and perhaps, ultimately, transcendence.

## The Traverse Novels—Evil, Politics, and Transcendence across Time and Space

Pynchon's most explicitly political novels are *Vineland* and *Against the Day*. Both are linked by the Traverse family who persistently attempt, but often fail, to resist the forces of capital and the state. They pay a heavy price across both books for their refusal to accept their position in the scheme ordained by evil plutocrats and functionaries of the state, ranging from political assassination, to exile and the forced abandonment and separation of their families. *Against the Day*, introduces us to the earlier generations of the Traverse family and is the work that most effectively sets out the relationship between politics and evil in Pynchon's universe and the nature of political possibility in the past and potential futures of mankind.

### The Politics of Resistance in *Against the Day* and *Vineland*

Anarchism, in the shape of the Traverse clan represents one reaction to the presence of Evil, namely the option of resistance to the State and capitalism and the search for an alternative counter culture to the prevailing bourgeois state. Anarchism is a recurring feature in Pynchon's works and anarchists are referenced in nearly all his novels from the peculiar gaucho in *V.* and the submariner anarchists in *Gravity's Rainbow* to the Traverse family in *Against the Day* and *Vineland* (Benson, 1989). In the early novels, anarchism plays little more than a piquant role, in *Vineland* and *Against the Day*, however, anarchism and anarchists are central to the action and Pynchon is clearly sympathetic to the cause. The debt owed to anarchist theory is clear in the details of the characters' speech, e.g., in what appears to be a clear homage to Bakunin's *Statism and Anarchy*, Cyprian Latewood characterises as 'Prussophiles' those who love power and who 'want to preside over the end of the world' (AtD, 906). For Pynchon's American anarchists in *Against the Day*, anarchism in the thoughts of Rev. Moss is described as follows:

Not as if the Rev wanted Heaven, he'd have been content with someplace the men didn't have to be set on each other like dogs in a dogfight for lung-destroying jobs that paid at best \$3-blessed-.50 a day – there had to be a living wage and some right to organize, because alone a man was a mule dropping on the edge of life's mountain trail, ready to be either squashed flat or kicked into the void

(AtD, 102).

Webb Traverse, the anarchist miner with an instinctive hatred for 'plutes' is a member of a loose community of 'terrorists' who dynamite the personnel and communications systems of capitalist America. Webb's anarchism is of a raw-boned and direct nature, inspired by labor activist Bill Haywood, whose slogan 'Labor produces all wealth. Wealth belongs to the producer thereof,' Webb praises for its straight talking in contrast to the mendacity of plutocratic democracy (AtD, 104). Reef Traverse, who is the most anarchist of Webb's children is described as 'believing unconditionally, poor fish, in the class war to come, commonwealth of toil that is to be' (AtD, 407). Reef's encounter with the European anarchists Wolfe Tone O'Rooney and Flaco gives Pynchon a chance to effectively outline the political theory of Bakunian Anarchism, including the violence they perceive as necessary to resist the State:

We look at the world, at governments, across the spectrum, some with more freedom, some with less. And we observe that the more repressive the State is, the closer life under it resembles Death. If dying is deliverance into a condition of total non-freedom, the State tends in the limit, to Death. The only way to address the problem of the State is with counter-Death, also known as Chemistry

(AtD, 419).

Pynchon does not shy away from the issue of the violent means used by the labour and anarchist movement in Europe and America, as Webb and his cohort refuse to accept the possibility of innocence, only the absolute commitment to resistance, in Rev. Gatlin's words: 'If you are not devoting every breath of every day waking and sleeping to destroying those who slaughter the innocent as easy as signing a check, then how innocent are you willing to call yourself? It must be negotiated with the day, from those absolute terms' (AtD, 97). This absolute commitment to resistance regardless of injury and death to the "innocent" is justified by Flaco the Catalanian anarchist in terms that clearly identify the infernal origins and nature of the State:

The State is evil, its divine right proceeds from Hell, Hell is where we all went. Some came out of Montjuich broken, dying, without working genitals, intimidated into silence. Whips and white-hot irons are certainly effective for that. But all of us, even those who had voted and paid our taxes like good



bourgeoisie, came out hating the State. I include in that obscene word the Church, the latifundios, the banks and corporations, of course

(AtD, 419).

Any action that can be taken against such an infernal enemy, can in the anarchist view be justified; for example, although Webb Traverse maintains that he would regret taking innocent lives, and denies ever taking an innocent life, he does not deny that the taking of bourgeois life, by definition not innocent life, is acceptable (AtD, 203). Reef Traverse, who assumes his father's mantle as the Anarchist icon, the Kieselguhr Kid, represents initially at least the destructive side of anarchism, 'the desire, the desperate need to create a radius of annihilation that, if it could not include the ones who deserved it, might as well include himself' (AtD, 106). Ultimately, however, Reef rejects the use of indiscriminate violence against populations (AtD, 953). Ewball Oust, another committed anarchist modifies the use of anarchist violence by insisting that only the guilty should be targeted as 'anything else is being just like them, slaughtering the innocent, when what we need is more slaughterin of the guilty' (AtD, 1034). This is consistent with Pynchon's early observation on the Watts riots that 'Far from a sickness, violence may be an attempt to communicate or to be who you really are' (JMW, 84). This idea of violence as communication is, of course, very similar to the Anarchist principle of propaganda of the deed.

With the death of Scarsdale Vibe, and the end of their personal quest for vengeance for the death of their father, the Traverses withdraw from confrontation and instead head to the periphery of the US to escape the attention of the 'capitalist-Christer gridwork' (AtD, 1208). The politics of confrontation, of which the Traverses were the embodiment, evolves into a politics of flight, an attempt to secure freedom by simply avoiding the manifestation of a capitalist America which in the words of Kit Traverse's Japanese lover, Umeke, is 'mechanically destined to move forward regardless of who is in the way or underfoot.' (AtD, 636). Pynchon's most poignant expression of this politics of flight is his evocation of an anarchist Utopia:

...someplace all the Anarchists could escape to, now with the danger so overwhelming, a place readily found even on cheap maps of the world, some group of green volcanic islands, each with its own dialect, too far from the sea-lanes to be of use as a coaling station, lacking nitrate sources, fuel deposits, desirable ores either precious or practical, and so left forever immune to the bad luck and worse judgment infesting the politics of the Continents-a place promised to them ... by certain hidden geometries of History, which must include, somewhere, at least a single point, a safe conjugate to all the spill of accursed meridians, passing daily, desolate one upon the next

(AtD, 420).<sup>1</sup>

Despite his obviously sympathetic representation of Anarchist communities in *Against the Day*, e.g., the Yz-les-Bains collective, Pynchon's ultimate statement on the politics of resistance is one of rejection due to the futility of idealist schemes in relation to human realities. Pynchon makes this futility clear in an exchange between Yashmeen Halfcourt and Stray Briggs. As Yashmeen suggests from the apparent refuge in Kitsap that their community seceded from the Union and start their own Republic, Stray responds: 'em things never work out. Fine idea while the opium supply lasts, but sooner or later plain old personal meanness gets in the way. Someone runs the well dry, somebody rolls her eyes at the wrong husband' (AtD, 1210). This exchange demonstrates Pynchon's admitted debt to Machiavelli and his theory of human nature. A final point that needs to be considered is that all resistance is in itself predicated in terms dictated by the powerful – They control the game of violence both in terms of capacity and even at the structural level. As Mackey states in relation to *Gravity's Rainbow*, the only genuine strategy of resistance is avoidance, to escape the gaze of the powerful, to live beyond their snares (Mackey, 1984, 18).

## Resistance by Occlusion in *Vineland*

*Vineland* presents contemporary America as the culmination of the extension and intensification of the 'capitalist-Christer gridwork' and its collusion with the State. *Vineland* is in part a repudiation of the idea that one can in fact escape the ever expanding and deepening power of the state and the capitalist-christer network. For Pynchon the period 1967 – 1984 is the final crucible of American political history, one in which the politics of revolt and repression is played out in vivid terms in an America that has, under the universal influence of The Tube, become largely apathetic. In his post-*Vineland* article, *Nearer My Couch to Thee*, Pynchon expands on the

pervading inertia that typifies (post)modern culture – expressed in terms of the deadly sin Sloth, and its political manifestation, apathy. Sloth is powerful because ‘Sloth is our background radiation, our easy-listening station – it is everywhere, and no longer noticed.’ Sloth is seen as emanating from The Tube which has, fatally, given us its gifts:

... its gifts of paralysis, along with its creature and symbiont, the notorious Couch Potato. Tales spun in idleness find us Tubeside, supine, chiropractic fodder, sucking it all in, re-enacting in reverse the transaction between dream and revenue that brought these colored shadows here to begin with so that we might feed, uncritically, committing the six other deadly sins in parallel, eating too much, envying the celebrated, coveting merchandise, lusting after images, angry at the news, perversely proud of whatever distance we may enjoy between our couches and what appears on the screen

(NMC).

To further illustrate the danger of Tubelife, Pynchon introduces the Thanatoids: ambiguously ghostly creatures both living and undead who inhabit Vineland’s Shade Creek and other small towns – beings existing, or at least present, as eternal reruns of programs past (their lives pre-cancellation, i.e., death or other forms of irrelevance) seeking meaning or recompense (karmic resolution in Takeshi Fumimota’s formulation) but incapable of acting after a lifetime of consumption and resentment. The Thanatoids, unsure whether they are living or dead, are living ghosts in a reality shaped by the ghostly unreality of actors on the Tube. Reagan is the great Thanatoid President, appearing wraithlike across the screen from *Death Valley Days* to the six o’clock news. In the analysis of Isaiah Two Four, punk rock musician in *Vineland*, it is the Tube that accounts for the failure of the 60s Left and its fall from grace:

Whole problem ‘th you folks’s generation,” Isaiah opined, “nothing personal, is you believed in your Revolution, put your whole lives out there for it – but you sure didn’t understand much about the Tube. Minute the Tube got hold of you folks that was it, that whole alternative America, el deado meato, just like th’ Indians, sold it all to your real enemies, and even in 1970 dollars – it was way too cheap. ...

(*Vineland*, 373).

In the prelapsarian era of the 60s, before the Tube emasculated the idealism of the baby-boomers, another world was possible as a reaction to the lie-dream of the conservative 50s. The decision of the innocent rebels of the College of Surf to secede from the union, and to name it ‘after the one constant they could count on never to die, The People’s Republic of Rock and Roll’ (PR<sup>3</sup>) leads to a text-book demonstration of the power of the State, in particular in the person of Brock Vond, to seduce and smash an incipient revolution in a manner very similar to that predicted by Stray Briggs. Vond, a fascistic misogynist, exerts a powerful attraction over Frenesi Gates. Frenesi, through the dissociating inner lens of her Tube life (Brooks 1997, 86) views her actions as if some other figure is performing them in a TV show. In thrall to her inner desire for fascist power, she cannot resist Vond’s manipulations and ultimately arranges the death of PR<sup>3</sup> leader Weed Atman on his orders.

With the leader removed, the forces of the state entered the PR<sup>3</sup>, ‘a scattered nightlong propagation of human chaos, random shooting, tear gas from above, buildings and cars set ablaze, everyone a possible enemy.’ (*Vineland*, p. 247). The ringleaders are captured and taken to Brock Vond’s re-education camp, ‘feedlots where we’d all become official, nonhuman livestock ... Nixon had machinery for mass detention all in place and set to go. Reagan’s got it for when he invades Nicaragua.’ (*Vineland*, 264). Vond’s second strategy is to offer bribes and snitch money, such that in the Revolutionary world:

... betrayal became routine, government procedures for it so simple and greased that no one, Frenesi was finding out, no matter how honorable their lives so far, could be considered safely above it ... leaving the merciless spores of paranoia wherever it flowed, fungoid reminders of its passage. These people had known their children after all, perfectly

(AtD, 239).

It is Weed Atman’s killer, Rex Snuvvle, who accurately portrays what is at stake in the politics of resisting the State and its allies:

You’re up against the True Faith here, some heavy dudes, talking crusades, retribution, closed ideological minds passing on the Christian Capitalist Faith intact, mentor to protégé, generation to generation, living inside their power, convinced they’re immune to all the history the rest of us have to suffer. They are bad, bad’s they come, but that still doesn’t make us good, not 100%

(*Vineland*, 232).

Mankind's inability to be 100% good leads to the failure of any attempt to resist the power of those that Brock Vond serves, the 'Real Ones' who remain in true power, those who 'however political fortunes below might bloom and die ... remained year in and year out, keeping what was desirable flowing their way' (*Vineland*, 276).

As in *Against the Day*, all that can really be done in the face of the power of the Christer-Capitalist network and the State, is to flee its power centres, to seek refuge in the oases off the map of social control where they could escape, 'the scabland garrison state the green free America of their childhoods even then was turning into,' (*Vineland*, 314). *Vineland*, home to veteran rebels the Traverses and the Beckers, is such a place, but even here, Brock Vond penetrates:

... terrorizing the neighborhood for weeks, running up and down dirt lanes in formation chanting "War-on-drugs! War-on-drugs!" Strip-searching folks in public, killing dogs, rabbits, cats and chickens, pouring herbicide down wells that couldn't remotely be used to irrigate dope crops and acting indeed, as several neighbours observed, as if they had invaded some hapless land far away, instead of a short plane ride from San Francisco

(*Vineland*, 357).

In the final analysis, it is only the indifference of the Reagan administration that saves the Beckers and the Traverses from Brock Vond's 'death from slightly above' attack helicopter. From the Reagan administration's point of view there is no point in continuing to crush an irrelevant enemy who has already been seduced by the Tube. The Revolution and counter-revolution of the 1960s is effectively and symbolically ended by the requirements of fiscal rectitude and the accounting programs of the Treasury. The executive power, with its control of the army and the willing compliance of the media and other institutions of power has effectively seized the country and put in place the mechanism for a fascist regime, albeit one more banal and Tube friendly than its predecessors (Thoreen, 2003, 215–233). The marginal communities of *Vineland* are saved not by their own volition, but rather their irrelevance and the imperious indifference of their enemies. They are tolerated by a foe for which they are nothing but a piquant reminder of the struggles of the past-struggles that 'They' have won. For Pynchon, the ultimate consequence of resistance is futility (Duyfhuizen, 2007; doCarmo, 1999, 183). David Cowart (1994, 3) argues that Pynchon 'tends to deconstruct the myths he invokes,' but misses Pynchon's deconstruction of the myths of the Left as well as the Right – for Pynchon, all oppositional politics is suspect, as Tabbi states, 'if *Vineland* tells us anything, it is that such an "underground" resistance has long since stopped being viable' (Tabbi, 1994, 99). Perhaps Pynchon's most eloquent and ironic statement on the impossibility of Anarchist success is the paradox of Jesús Arrabal in *The Crying of Lot 49*. Arrabal, a lifelong anarchist, reveals to Oedipa Maas that an Anarchist revolution would be such a miraculous event that its occurrence could only come about as a result of the will of a divine orderer, and hence would invalidate the very principles of anarchy itself. Anarchism as an ideal must dissolve (Levine: 2003, 75) as it comes up against the corrupted political entity of the Earth unredeemed and its less than perfect inhabitants.

## Transcending Politics: The Chums of Chance

If the politics of resistance to the inevitable spread of capital and the power of the state are noble but ultimately irrelevant, Pynchon seems to pose another question: 'how best to live in such a manner as to escape their power?' In contrast to Lois Tyson, who reads Pynchon's novels, in particular *The Crying of Lot 49*, as an exercise in the politics of despair (Tyson, 1991), it is possible to read Pynchon as an advocate of partial salvation. The world is, according to Pynchon in *Mason & Dixon*, 'our home and our Despair' (M&D, 345) yet in *Against the Day*, Pynchon presents a hope for Mankind tied to the very leaving of Earth, which is the cosmological booty and companion sphere of Hell. Salvation, for Pynchon, seems to involve adopting an apolitical form of life that embodies a quasi-Nietzschean *joie de vivre*, and an adventurousness which leads to an attempt to gain access to the celestial, superterrestrial sphere. In contrast to the Beckers and Traverses, who in their choice to resist evil remain human, all too human, and ultimately subject to the power of the capitalistchrister network, the Chums of Chance choose to create their own world, above and distinct from the unredeemable Earth.

The evolution of the 'sky brothers' of *Against the Day*, from larking gadabouts and occasional stooges, to almost transcendent beings representing the best hope for humanity, is the key political theme of the novel. Pynchon proposes that refuting the claims of Earth's politics would lead to a removal of the dependence on the psychopathologies of capitalism and the state and thereby lead to true freedom. The strategy of those who would counter the power of the rich and the powerful is not to fight them on their own terms in this world, as in the Anarchist scheme, but rather to create new worlds free from the cosmological commitments of the doomed Earth.

The Chums of Chance take their inspiration from the first band of sky brothers, the Garçons de '71. The Garçons make a definitive break with the terrestrial order and its politics after they observe:

... how much the modern State depended for its survival on maintaining a condition of *permanent siege*—through the systematic encirclement of populations, the starvation of bodies and spirits, the relentless degradation of civility until citizen was turned against citizen, even to the point of committing atrocities ... When the Sieges ended, these balloonists chose to fly on free now of the political delusions that reigned more than ever on the ground, pledged solemnly only to one another, proceeding as if under a world-wide, never-ending siege

(AtD, 22).

Pynchon often stresses the disconnection between the Chums' realm and that of the politics of the world below, extending to a clear rejection of authority as being merely, 'Surface jurisdiction only. Nothing to do with us' (AtD, 618). Pynchon presents the sky-life as coming at the expense of an engagement in the affairs of the Earth, even to the extent of being ignorant of WW1:

Miles was aware in some dim way that this, as so much as else, had to do with the terms of the long unspoken contract between the boys and their fate – as if, long ago, having learned to fly, in soaring free from the enfoldment by the indicative world below, they had paid with a waiver of allegiance to it and all that would occur down on the surface

(AtD, 1149).

The narrative of *Against the Day* concerns the process by which the members of the crew of the *Inconvenience* become free of their remaining 'political delusions' and professional entanglements to become instead a genuine alternative to the hell-bound politics of Earth.

The increasing encroachment of Hell on the Earth forces the crew of the *Inconvenience* to confront Hell's minions, and in doing so to further evolve as a community that offers an alternative to the victory of the Cosmic Fascist. This evolution begins in the filthy, decaying sewers of New York, where the two youngest members of the crew of *Inconvenience*, Chick Counterfly and Darby Suckling are led to the laboratory of Dr. Zoot who has 'picked up' a time machine. Upon entering the time machine they are brought to two locations in the future: the first presents a vision of a melancholy, misshapen humanity 'borne terribly over the edge of the visible world' and another populated with 'ferally purring stridencies ... not beasts. Everywhere rose the smell of excrement and dead tissue' (AtD, 455). This future is perhaps the culmination of humanity as Thanatoids, humanity lost to its own restless, yet passive, resentment – finally resulting in humanity's carcass serving as rotten meat for posthuman carrion. This vision of the future eventually leads the Chums of Chance to Alonzo Meatman, who makes the Chums aware of the existence of the Trespassers and their representative, the sinister Mr. Ace.

Mr. Ace presents himself as a fugitive from the future, a future that has followed capitalism to its ultimate conclusion. The future world of the Trespassers exposes the cost of untrammelled capitalism:

... a time of worldwide famine, exhausted fuel supplies, terminal poverty – the end of the capitalistic experiment. Once we came to understand the simple thermodynamic truth that the Earth's resources were limited, in fact soon to run out, the whole capitalist illusion fell to pieces

(AtD, 467).

Although Mr. Ace presents himself as a refugee from this time, the truth is that he is one of a desperate community from the future determined to occupy the past. Far from escaping the consequences of capitalism, the trespassers instead want to extend its most vicious form into the 'time regime' of the Chums of Chance. Mr. Ace tries to offer a bribe of eternal youth to the Chums of Chance to aid his cause, who were unaware that their superiors were sending them on

missions designed to foil the designs of the Trespassers. Ace curiously tries to justify his bribe by reference to the gift of beads to the Native Americans by the early colonial settlers of America, seemingly unaware that this provides quite the opposite impression to that of sincerity and goodwill that he seeks to convey (AtD, 468).

The infernal fate of Earth is further stressed by the Trespasser Ryder Thorn who in seeking to discover what the Chums of Chance, and in particular, Miles Blundell, knows of their plans, reveals the eventual fate of humanity: 'Damn you Blundell, damn you all. You have no idea what you're heading into. This world you take to be 'the' world will die, and descend into Hell, and all history after that will belong properly to the history of Hell' (AtD, 622). It is during this conversation that Miles intuits that the Trespassers have fallen through time, rather than travelled through it – this passage through time being made possible by the violence of WW1 and other disasters, man-made and natural. The great Tunguska explosion is linked to the entry *en masse* of the Trespassers into the Twentieth Century (AtD, 878) and the advent of the Trespassers themselves as the beginning of the end for an Earth already doomed to be swallowed into the jaws of hell. Fleetwood Vibe, brother of Scarsdale, seeks their hidden cities in Siberia, destined he believes, to take part in their 'unspeakable compact with sin and death,' (AtD, 888). Evoking elements of H.P. Lovecraft, Pynchon suggests that the Trespassers are not alone in their entry into the space-time of twentieth century Earth, but rather something else, some dark force is accompanying them, 'come in out of that unlimited darkness ... [to] wipe us from the Creation' (AtD, 879).

In a crucial scene with their 'sky brother' Padzhitnoff, the Chums claim that they no longer work for the American government (implying that at least at one stage they did), instead claiming that they work only for 'Ourselves,' meaning the national organisation of the Chums of Chance (AtD, 892). It is their encounters with the Trespassers, and the implicit corruption of the 'hierarchy,' as evidenced by the collusion with Alonzo Meatman, and the eventual disappearance of 'orders from above' (and funding from above) that frees the crew of the *Inconvenience* from their immediate obligations to their corporate masters – leaving the crew of the *Inconvenience* as a small community of free men. Thus untethered, they drift towards their fateful encounter with the strange cosmic event in the Sahara where the Earth bifurcates in a typically Pynchonian 'expansion of possibilities' leading to the Chums being simultaneously 'on the Counter-Earth, on it and of it, yet at the same time also on the Earth they had never it seemed, left' (AtD, 1148). The final 'political delusion' they slough off is their commitment to:

An American Republic whose welfare they believed they were sworn to advance passed so irrevocably into the control of the evil and moronic ... Sworn by their Foundational Memorandum never to interfere in the affairs of the "groundhogs," they looked on in helplessness and a depression of spirit new to them

(AtD, 1148).

Despite the gloomy prognosis of Pynchon as regards the future of 'the' Earth, he does not quite abandon hope. Mankind is spared certain doom by the expansion of possibility due to the operation of dual refraction and the warping of space and time as the Earth traverses the universe (AtD, 774). 'The' narrative of *Against the Day* is composed of selections from several possible stories, not all of which are related to each other. *Against the Day* is a pluralized universe in which there are multiple Chums of Chance, multiple pasts and multiple futures beyond that selected by Pynchon. Jeffrey Howard refers to this plurality of possibilities as 'subjunctivity,' a condition in which change is possible not merely in the metaphysical, but also the socio-political sphere (Howard, 2003, 166–168; Thomas, 2007, 34; Shapiro, 2006). The future for humanity selected for his narrative is not completely hopeless and the key to not merely its survival but its flourishing is the newly liberated-from-the-political crew of the *Inconvenience* and their fellow sky brothers, and by this stage, an increasing number of sky sisters. Penny Black of the recently amalgamated Bindlestiffs of the Blue and Garçons de 71, describes the process as being an attempt to 'literally transcend the old political space, the map-space of two dimensions, by climbing into the third' (AtD, 1218). Pynchon here is clearly advocating a transcendent flight from politics and even existence as we have known it, very much in the manner of David Porush's analysis of transcendence in *Vineland*, 'the only hope for redemption from pedestrian, but ubiquitous, evil is to allow epistemological and ontological commitments to collapse into the transcendental ... recognizing deeper and unutterable truths' (Porush, 1994, 32).

Over time, the Chums and their mates, the Sodality of Ætheronauts, become a veritable celestial city, 'so big that when people on the ground see it in the sky, they are struck with selective hysterical blindness and end up not seeing it at all' (AtD, 1218). The Chums have escaped the pull of the Earth and all it entails, 'It is no longer a matter of gravity – it is an acceptance of sky' (AtD, 1219). By the end, the *Inconvenience* has become a new paradise or Shambhala – a 'destination in itself' where unlimited possibility is the ultimate aim. The now community of *Inconvenience* proceed with a faith in the redeemed future and head towards an eventual meeting with the transcendent:

They know – Miles is certain – it is there, like an approaching rainstorm, but invisible. Soon they will see the pressure-gauge begin to fall. They will feel the turn in the wind. They will put on smoked goggles for the glory of what is coming to part the sky. They fly toward grace

(AtD, 1220).

It is either a textual clue and nod of recognition, or a telling and important coincidence, that Pynchon's supermen are pilots who take permanently to the skies in a manner similar to Nietzsche's final aphorism, 'We Aeronauts of the Spirit' in *Daybreak*

*Other birds will fly farther!* This insight and faith of ours vies with them in flying up and away ... Whither does this mighty longing draw us, this longing that is worth more to us than any pleasure? Why just in this direction, thither where all the suns of humanity have hitherto gone down. Will it perhaps be said of us one day that we too, steering westward, hoped to reach an India – but that it was our fate to be wrecked against infinity? Or, my brothers. Or? –

Pynchon provides in the narrative arc of the Chums of Chance in *Against the Day*, an answer to this Or? The book concludes with their escape from the inevitable failure of Man as they fly towards grace – a process described by Samuel Thomas in relation to *Mason & Dixon* as Pynchon's 'impulse towards immanent transcendence' (Thomas, 2007, 37).<sup>2</sup>

This access to a plenitude of grace is an extension of the 'minimum grace' afforded to other characters in the Pynchon universe, best exemplified by the sentiment, 'if "not all children are preserved," it is also true that "not all lemmings go over the cliff"' (McClure: 2007, 41). The Chums of Chance have created their own Shambhala by being Columbian explorers and adventurers, literally aeronauts of the spirit. The grace they fly towards is essentially to escape the finite and the determined, to avoid wreckage against infinity and to finally ascend toward the sun.

## Conclusion—the Futility of Politics and the Necessity for Transcendence

Pynchon's political theory is one of resistance being a noble, but futile gesture in the face of the 'real' politics of grasping power, money and influence. The world is condemned to sink into the gaping maw of Hell under the weight of this politics, and all attempts to stop this are doomed to fail, not only because of the evil without humanity, but because of the evil within humanity. Pynchon subscribes to Yeats' culturally pessimistic notion that 'the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.' There is no route to Shambhala, or the superterrestrial sphere through politics – no redemption through anarchism. In this sense Pynchon's work is a repudiation of politics, an attempt to confront humanity with its personal failings and to highlight the shortcomings of the way in which we live. This is not, however, where Pynchon's politics, considered in the wider sense, end. He also puts forward the notion that some people can evade power temporarily by fleeing the grid of social control like the Beckers and Traverses, this however, is merely an illusory freedom granted by the powers that be. It is preferable, from Pynchon's point of view, is to renounce the world, to build a new reality away from the doomed and corrupted Earth. *Against the Day* therefore is a great metaphor for the renunciation of all political life understood in terms of Right versus Left: rather Man should seek to transcend that kind of politics and seek to reconfigure political life itself, from two dimensions of oppositional politics to the three dimensions of life above and beyond our current existence. Frustratingly, and in a manner similar to Nietzsche, Pynchon leaves us at the cusp of this new politics – the Chums of Chance fly towards grace, but we do not see what they discover there.

The multifarious characters of the Pynchon universe are likely to remain as relevant to us as any of the other great characters of fiction. As Shklar states in relation to Lemuel Gulliver in *Gulliver's Travels*, Gulliver, 'is our contemporary because his creator permits us to deal with irrationality and our reactions to it' (Shklar: 1985, 7). Confronting the irrational drives that inform

politics allows the author and his/her readers to 'recognize the actual in these hateful pictures of the possible', the advantage of literature being that it allows the teasing out of theory's implications for reality (Shklar, 1985, 8). Furthermore, literature personalises abstract problems and suggests solutions, or at least alternatives, to existing political problems and systems. As Pynchon writes in 'The Heart's Eternal Vow' (his review of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*), literature allows us to see 'how it could all plausibly come about, even – wild hope – for somebody out here, outside a book, even as inevitably beaten at, bought and resold as we all must have become if only through years of simple residence in the injuring and corruptive world' (HEV). What is necessary for Pynchon is a wholesale change in how and why we live, and his later books are both diagnostic and increasingly critical, yet not without 'wild hope.' In 'Is it O.K. to Be a Luddite?' Pynchon discusses the positive aspects of Luddite attitudes as a corrective to the alienation inherent in the mechanisation of culture, Pynchon provides us with his most explicit statement regarding the potential of literature to act as a means of resistance, that a Luddite novel like *Frankenstein* has the ability 'through literary means which are nocturnal and deal in disguise, to deny the machine' (OKL; Cowart, 2003, 261–281). Pynchon thus is in the tradition of great American writers who in Deneen and Romance's astute observation 'long ago realized that it was through the novel, the novella, and the story that the philosophic education of America's citizens would best be undertaken' (Deneen and Romance: 2005, 4).

Humanity must live not according to its current reality (and the 'Serious' literature that legitimates it), dictated (in metaphorical terms) by Hell, but should rather lift its gaze heavenward. It is no surprise that most people cannot see the *Inconvenience*, the celestial city, as it passes overhead. The *Inconvenience* is promised only to an Elect, those possessing the *frolliche wissenschaft*, capable of wanting to accept the sky and letting go the claims of the Earth below – Pynchon does not believe in the redemption of all men. The Anarchist dream of revolution is merely an illusion. A rejection of the unredeemed Earth and all it stands for is the pre-requisite for admission into the community of adventurous, fraternal supermen (and women) who inhabit this sphere. Pynchon therefore, despite his sympathy with the ideals of Anarchism, and opposition to Fascism, is revealed not to be an Anarchist, but a Nietzschean Elitist – professing a vision of the salvation of the few, not the many.

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## Notes

1. For the importance of cartography in Pynchon see Shapiro's discussion of surveying and mapping in *Mason & Dixon*, Michael J. Shapiro, *Deforming American Political Thought. Ethnicity, Facticity, Genre* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2006). Shapiro's acute observation is that 'Pynchon's novel reveals the dark side of the Euro American enactment of the enlightenment through its surveying vehicles.' In *Against the Day*, one of Pynchon's motifs (to be explored in this article) is the flight of the anarchists to the margins of the surveyed world and the transcendence of the surveyed and the surveyable terrain of Earth and its maps by the astronauts.

2. One could see in this, perhaps the influence of Deleuze and Guattari's treatment of immanent transcendence, however, this influence is by no means certain and the idea is not unique to Deleuze and Guattari. Pynchon's ambivalent and gently satirical reference to the *Italian Wedding Fake Book* by Deleuze and Guattari in *Vineland*, perhaps implies that he does not take their work very seriously or he may be suggesting that one may turn to Deleuze and Guattari in any and every eventuality. Such ambivalent treatments of concepts, persons and events are often at the core of Pynchon's work.

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